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Sir Walter Scott's *The Antiquary* and the *Ossian* Controversy.

Nigel Leask

Although *The Antiquary* was a personal favourite of Sir Walter Scott's, he worried that it was more concerned 'to describe manners minutely, than to arrange...an artificial and combined narration'; and regretted that he had been 'unable to unite these two requisitions of a good Novel'.¹ Critics have largely endorsed this view, especially when compared to *Waverley* and *Guy Mannering*, Scott's first two novels. Penny Fielding describes *The Antiquary* as 'an unhistorical historical novel', while Ian Duncan notes that for 'a work composed mere months after Waterloo...[it's striking that it] unfolds its epiphany of national solidarity through the mock-heroic narration of a conflict that does not take place'. (He refers here to the French invasion scare that turns out to be a false alarm at the novel's conclusion.)² Reflecting on Scott's sense of imbalance, David Punter suggests that *The Antiquary* is more concerned with the making of history than with history itself.³ He describes the rather stagey Gothic plot as a 'peg on which to hang a series of characters and a set of views on the central issues raised by the cultural phenomenon of the 'antiquary', (p.xiv) which seems absolutely right.

But what exactly is at stake regarding these 'central issues'? The late Susan Manning argued that in its obsession with material particularities, antiquarianism was 'the "other" of Enlightenment historiography, the double agent on its boundaries', obsessed by the flotsam and jetsam of the past, yet lacking the connectivity that made for grand historical narrative.⁴ Scott's own comments on *The Antiquary* seem to acknowledge that: for all the satire leveled at Jonathan Oldbuck and his ilk, he had himself succumbed to a kind of literary antiquarianism in preferring the description of manners to narrative. Moreover, in 1836, John Gibson Lockhart noted that, despite laying false trails for identifying Oldbuck's real-life prototype, '[Scott] could

¹ Sir Walter Scott, *The Antiquary*, intro. by David Punter, ed. by David Hewitt, (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1999), p. 3. (Pagination henceforward given in brackets in text.)

² Penny Fielding, *Scotland and the Fictions of Geography: North Britain 1760-1830*, (Cambridge University Press, 2008) p. 120, Duncan, *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 139.

³ David Punter, intro to *The Antiquary*, p.xiv,

⁴ Susan Manning, 'Antiquarianism and the Scottish Science of Man', in Leith Davis, Ian Duncan, Janet Sorenson, (eds.) *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism* (Cambridge UP, 2004), pp.68,7.

hardly...have scrupled about recognizing a quaint caricature of the founder of the Abbotsford Museum, in the inimitable portraiture of the Laird of Monkbarne'.⁵

In focusing on one of these antiquarian debates in particular, namely the controversy following James Macpherson's publication, in the early 1760's, of what he claimed were his 'translations' of the poems of the 3rd century Gaelic bard Ossian, I might seem to be making a mountain out of a molehill, given that in plot terms, sustained discussion of *Ossian* is limited to a single chapter (volume III, chapter 1). There it serves the limited purpose of dramatizing the relationship between Oldbuck and his hot-headed nephew Hector MacIntyre. *The Antiquary's* more extensive concern with Roman and medieval antiquities better reflects Oldbuck's own scholarly tastes: and we even learn that the unworldly Lord Glenallan has never heard of *Ossian*. (p.277) Neither does the Gaelic world of *Ossian* seem particularly relevant to the novel's Lowland setting in 'Fairport' (most likely situated on the north-east coast of Scotland, somewhere like Montrose or Arbroath), geographically distinct from the Highlands of *Waverley*, *Rob Roy*, or Scott's Highland verse romances.

Nevertheless, in Scott's time, Macpherson's *Ossian* poems and the controversy they aroused played an important role in the debate about Scottish history, literature, and identity. This was true even in the years after the Highland Society of Edinburgh had published its largely damning report on *Ossian* in 1805 (the subject of a long essay by Scott in the *Edinburgh Review*, which I will discuss below), that's to say a decade before the composition of *The Antiquary*. Scott elsewhere admitted that he had 'devoured rather than perused' *Ossian* as a boy, and in the 1830 Preface to his *Poems* acknowledged that Macpherson had first persuaded him that 'writings on Highland subjects were qualified to interest the reader'.⁶ Strange then that absolutely no reference is made to *Ossian* (or to James Macpherson) in either *The Lady of the Lake* (1810) or *The Lord of the Isles* (1815), both of them set in the Highlands, and both accompanied by voluminous antiquarian notes. So how does one explain the sudden obtrusion of *Ossian* in *The Antiquary*? In this essay I'll explore the relationship of *Ossian* with some of the novel's other antiquarian preoccupations, as

⁵ Quoted in Caroline McCracken-Flesher, *Possible Scotlands: Walter Scott and the Story of Tomorrow*, (Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 33.

⁶ Walter Scott, *Poetical Works*, ed. J. Logie Robertson, (London: Henry Froude 1913), p. 274.

well as its construction of Scottish identity, concluding with a suggestion that Macpherson's poem may even have inspired elements of the much-maligned plot of *The Antiquary*.

At stake here was more than just a question of 'authenticity', namely Macpherson's claim that *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, or his epics *Fingal*, and *Temora* were 'translations' of ancient Gaelic poetry. Just as contentious was his boldly revisionist account of Scottish history presented in the poem's introductory dissertations, footnotes and appendices. Here he sought to promote, in Colin Kidd's words, 'the continuity of Scottish liberty and national identity from hazy Caledonian roots'.⁷ Rejecting George Buchanan's 'Dalriadan' account of early Scottish history, Macpherson proposed that the modern Highlanders, 'are the genuine descendants of the antient Caledonians, and not a pretended colony of Scots [from Ireland], who settled first in the north, in the third or fourth century'.⁸ He gravely offended Irish opinion by representing the Irish as descended from Scottish colonisers (the reverse of the established view represented by Buchanan), and in his epic *Fingal* depicting them and their leader Cuchullin as vulnerable and enfeebled, dependent upon the Scottish 'Fingal, King of Morven', to rescue them from invading Norsemen.⁹ It's now widely accepted that *Ossian* presented its readers with an ideologically as well as aesthetically doctored version of genuine Gaelic tradition.¹⁰ But the extent to which *Fingal* is the offspring of Galgacus (the heroic leader of the Caledonians at the battle of Mons Graupius in AD 43, in Tacitus's *Agricola*) has never been adequately grasped by commentators. *Fingal* asserted Scotland's flagging national pride during the crisis of the Bute administration, when it was still smarting from the debacle of

⁷ Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of Anglo-British Identity, 1689-1830* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 235.

⁸ James Macpherson, 'A Dissertation', (1763) in *The Poems of Ossian, and Related Works*, ed. Howard Gaskill, with intro by Fiona Stafford, (Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 207.

⁹ See Clare O'Halloran, *Golden Ages and Barbarous Nations: Antiquarian Debate and Cultural Politics in Ireland, c. 1750-1800* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2004), pp. 97-124.

¹⁰ Richard Sher has read *Ossian* in the context of the 'Poker's Club's' campaign for a Scottish Militia in the 1760s, as a response to the threat of French invasion during the Seven Years War, one aspect of Macpherson's nationalistic bid to bolster the myth of Caledonian resistance to foreign invaders. Richard Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p.242-61; Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past*, p.219-39. For Macpherson, *Ossian*'s third-century setting permitted *Fingal* to be represented as the leader of Scotland's Iron Age tribes against the Roman *imperium* in the figure of 'Caracul, the son of the *King of the World*' (*Ossian*, p.47), a metaphor for Hanoverian triumphalism.

Culloden, and government-enforced military impotence in the face of the renewed threat of foreign invasion.

In first half of the 18th century, travelling antiquaries like Alexander Gordon (author of the 1726 *Itinerarium Settentrionale*, the weighty tome which Oldbuck is clutching in the Queensferry Diligence, in the opening scenes of Scott's novel), obsessively tracked the Scottish sites of Roman camps and battles in search of the material traces of Roman conquest. But after 1760, the publication of *Ossian* reinvented the Highland landscape as the scene of Fingalian resistance, rather than Roman triumph, quite possibly because the military threat of Jacobitism had been defeated, and once-rebellious Gaels drafted into Britain's military struggle against France. The famous boulder burial in Perthshire's 'Sma' Glen', for example, was initially identified as a 'Roman' tomb by Hanoverian soldiers constructing General Wade's road network in the 1730s, but sometime after 1760 it was named (or renamed) 'Clach-Ossian' or 'Ossian's Grave', and it became an obligatory site on the eighteenth-century *petit tour*, inspiring Wordsworth's 1805 poem 'Glen-Almain': 'In this still place, remote from men, /Sleeps Ossian, in the NARROW GLEN', even if the poem remains agnostic about the authenticity (or otherwise) of Macpherson's poem.¹¹

But let us turn to Scott's novel. The central character of *The Antiquary* isn't of course the mysterious but insipid southern hero 'Mr Lovel', but the eponymous antiquary Jonathan Oldbuck, Laird of Monkbarns, whose good-humoured foibles and learned wit permeate the novel. Oldbuck's antiquarian obsessions are shared by his neighbor and sparring partner, the near-bankrupt landowner Sir Arthur Wardour. But it's not Wardour so much as the bluecoat beggar Edie Ochiltree who shares centre stage with Oldbuck, and both characters prove to be crucial agents in unfolding Scott's plot. Their relationship is dramatized in the famous episode early in the novel

¹¹ John O. Hayden (ed.), *William Wordsworth: The Poems*, 2 vols, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), vol. I, p. 638. A similar 'Fingalisation' of Highland topography occurred across the whole region as part of the pre-romantic transformation of Scotland, although after 1810 Walter Scott's fictional protagonists would replace the ghostly *dramatis personae* of *Ossian* in giving imaginative life to the emptying glens of the Highlands (as of the Lowlands and Borders), for a new generation of romantic tourists. Thanks to Margaret Bennett for pointing out to me that although no evidence survives, *Clach-na-Ossian* was in all likelihood the stone's traditional name in this part of the Perthshire *gaidhealtachd* long before its attribution as a 'Roman tomb'.

when Oldbuck is showing off his property of the ‘Kaim of Kilprunes’ to Lovel, which he claims to be the site of Agricola’s camp before the Battle of Mons Graupius, where the Romans had defeated the Caledonians in AD 84. Oldbuck’s claim is founded upon his discovery of a Roman altar stone bearing the inscription A.D.L.L., which he interprets as an acronym for *Agricola Dicavit Libens Libens* ‘(Agricola willingly and happily dedicated this)’. But Oldbuck’s antiquarian dreams of the Roman praetorium are shattered by Edie’s brutal interjection ‘I mind the bigging o’t’. The beggar insists that the inscription ADLL stands for ‘Aiken Drum’s Lang Ladle’, (p. 31) recalling how just twenty years before, he and some friends had built the shelter for Aiken’s bridal ceremony.

Yet while Scott explodes antiquarian illusions here, he hardly promotes the cause of skepticism: Caroline McCracken-Flesher rightly points out that ‘Edie tells a lie that should have been obvious to Scott’s readers’.¹² Far from being an old pal of Edie’s, Aiken Drum is the protagonist of a well known, and entirely fantastic children’s song, ‘He played upon a ladle, a ladle, a ladle... and his name was Aiken Drum’. Edie’s ‘correct’ version of historical memory turns out to be based on a scrap of playground verse. Ian Duncan writes that ‘frauds and hoaxes proliferate throughout the novel’s texture of allusion as well as its plot’.¹³ Oldbuck’s ‘praetorium’ is probably fraudulent, just like Edie’s claim that exposes it: so is the historicity of Oldbuck’s planned epic *The Caledoniad* (which I’ll compare with Macpherson’s *Fingal*, another ‘fraudulent epic’), or the genealogy of the early kings of Scotland contested by Wardour and Oldbuck. Hoaxes punctuate the plot as well: Dousterswivel’s ‘salted mine’ of non-existent treasure; the malicious claim that Lord Glenallan’s marriage is incestuous, or that the mysterious protagonist Lovel/Neville is illegitimate. A thin line divides the fraudulent from factual history for Scott, that great writer of historical fiction, who, we might recall, failed to deliver his own planned *History of Scotland* about the same time as he was composing *The Antiquary*. In this connection, McCracken-Flesher reminds us of ‘Hume’s caveats about how meaning is made: there is no ‘history’ without data, and the meaning that is identity – personal,

¹² Caroline McCracken-Flesher, *Possible Scotland*, p. 41.

¹³ Duncan, *Scott’s Shadow*, p. 139.

communal, national – is made in the gaps and from the clashes arising from the circulation of equivalent, fragmentary stuff'.¹⁴

If the Lovel/Neville plot centres on contested genealogy, the question of Scotland's (and by extension Britain's) national genealogy looms large in the antiquarian clashes between Oldbuck the Whig, and his Tory (and formerly Jacobite) neighbor, Sir Arthur Wardour. Oldbuck is descended from a line of Protestant German printers who had been exiled at the start of the Reformation for printing the Augsburg Confession, and like his father he strongly identifies with the Hanoverian dynasty and the Protestant succession. In 1745, Oldbuck senior, as provost of Fairport, had arrested the young Sir Arthur and his Jacobite father, and had them committed to the Tower for the duration of the uprising; but as we learn in chapter 5, historical enmity has mellowed into antiquarian sparring between the two neighbours. Oldbuck the Gothickist is firmly convinced that Scandinavia is the '*officina gentium*, the mother of modern Europe, the nursery of those heroes, "Stern to resolve, and stubborn to endure, / Who smiled in death?"' (pp.242-3) Wardour disagrees, preferring a story of Irish and Celtic antecedents.

The debate about Scottish origins is introduced in volume one chapter 6 in the form of an after-dinner disagreement about the authenticity of the Fergusian regal lists,¹⁵ leading to a dispute about the ethnicity of the Picts. After a tasty dinner of undercooked 'Solan Goose' (gannet) at Monkbarns, the two antiquaries press the respective claims of Celts and Goths, witnessed by the bemused Lovel, the ladies having wisely retired. Each party invokes a battery of antiquarian authorities: Oldbuck summons the authority of Sir Robert Sibbald, Alexander Gordon, and 'the learned [John] Pinkerton' in support of the Gothic origin of the Picts, while Wardour evokes Father Thomas Innes, George Chalmers, and Joseph Ritson in favour of the Celtic. Problematically, the sole surviving word of the Pictish language, (*penval*), can be interpreted to support either party, and Penny Fielding rightly observes that 'language breaks down as the key to ethnic origins, ancient history and property

¹⁴ *Possible Scotlands*, p. 40.

¹⁵ The Stuart royal genealogy based on the medieval and early modern histories of John of Fordun and Hector Boece, which dated the Scottish kings back to Fergus MacFerquard in 330 BC. For further discussion, see Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past*, pp. 26-29, 101-107.

rights'.¹⁶ As Colin Kidd has shown, the real-life debate was racially toxic. In his *Dissertation on the Origin and Progress of the Scythians or Goths* (1787), John Pinkerton (himself notorious for forging medieval Scottish ballads) argued for the superior Gothic origins of the Picts, and characterized the Celts as 'a weak and brutish people...savages since the world began...their personal manners are nasty and filthy, as they were in ancient times when they washed their bodies and cleaned their teeth with urine'.¹⁷ In only slightly milder vein, Oldbuck dismisses the Celtic genealogy of the Pictish kings as 'sprung from the tribe of Macfungus – mushroom monarchs every one of them; sprung up from the fumes of conceit, folly, and falsehood, fermenting in the brains of some mad Highland seannachie' (p. 49) (In contrast, by 1830 Scott had made up his own mind – *contra* Oldbuck - that both Scots and Picts were 'by descent a Celtic race'.)¹⁸ But it is a social rather than racial pedigree that turns the debate sour in this particular exchange, as Sir Arthur sneers at Oldbuck as 'descendant of a Westphalian printer', (p.50) and Oldbuck retaliates by reminding Wardour of the blot of illegitimacy on his family's escutcheon. Knockwinnock storms out of the house with his daughter Isabella, both nearly losing their lives to high tides on Halket-Head, but for the timely appearance of Lovel and Edie, who rescue them from a watery death.

The subject of *Ossian* is first raised in a breakfast conversation after Lovel's disturbed night in the haunted Green Chamber, when Oldbuck offers to 'show [him] the controversy upon Ossian's Poems between Mac-Cribb and me – I hold with the acute Orcadian – he with the defenders of the authenticity – the controversy began in smooth, oily, lady-like terms, but is now waxing more sour and eager as we get on – it already partakes somewhat of old Scaliger's style' (p. 84) As his name suggests, in addition to his Gaelic patronymic, 'Mac-Cribb' is something of an antiquarian magpie, and we elsewhere learn that he has walked off with Oldbuck's cherished 'Syrian medal' in his pocket. He comes up again later, when Oldbuck is lamenting the destruction of his 'lachrymatory from Clochnaben' by Hector's dog Juno, 'the main

¹⁶ Penny Fielding, *Scotland and the Fictions of Geography*, p. 114.

¹⁷ Quoted by Patrick O'Flaherty, *Scotland's Pariah: The Life and Work of John Pinkerton, 1758-1826*, (Toronto and London: Toronto University Press, 2015), pp. 46-7.

¹⁸ Walter Scott, 'Essay on Popular Poetry', in *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, ed. John Gibson Lockhart, (1833), vols i-iv of *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott*, 12 vols, (Edinburgh 1861), I, 27.

pillar of my theory...in despite of the ignorant obstinacy of Mac-Cribb, that the Romans has passed the defiles of these mountains'. (p.239)

Although 'Mac-Cribb' is a fictional composite of the Gaelic partisans for *Ossian* (scholars like the Revs. Donald MacNicol, Donald MacQueen, James MacLagan), Oldbuck's 'acute Orcadian' is a real character, the Scottish historian Malcolm Laing. Influenced by Pinkerton, Laing had attacked the authenticity of Macpherson's *Ossian* in his *History of Scotland* (1800) and again, with a rather obsessive display of critical energy, in an edition of Macpherson's poems published in 1805, which tracked every one of Macpherson's supposedly 'ancient' allusions and metaphors to a modern literary source, thereby proving to his satisfaction that the poems were forged. Notably, Laing also published Macpherson's juvenile poetic efforts, *The Hunter* and *The Highlander*, alongside the Ossianic corpus, to expose some telling similarities between the plots of his own verse and the supposedly 'traditional' epic *Fingal* – Laing noted that in both, a mysterious Scottish hero of indeterminate paternity rescues Gaeldom from foreign invasion, a point to which I will return.¹⁹

Walter Scott wrote in 1805 to the Lichfield poet Anna Seward: 'as for the great [Ossian] dispute, I would be no Scottishman if I had not very attentively considered it at some point in my studies'.²⁰ That same year, in July 1805, he published a lengthy review of the Highland Society's *Report on Ossian*, and of Malcolm Laing's edition, in the *Edinburgh Review*.²¹ Scott's review opens with a facetious worry that 'by mingling in the approaching storm, we run the risk of a chance-blow from a Highland claymore, or an Orcadian battle-axe'. (ER 429) He demolished one of Macpherson's partisans for explaining away Laing's critique on the grounds that it was inspired by resentment at the 'severe checks given by the ancient Caledonians to [his] predatory Scandinavian predecessors', which had 'raised

¹⁹ Scott facetiously commented that Laing's edition would have been more correctly entitled "The Poetical Works of James Macpherson, &c., containing The Poems of Ossian", *Edinburgh Review*, 6 (July 1805), p. 433.

²⁰ Scott also confessed here that he had 'devoured rather than perused' Ossian as a boy', before his maturing taste grew tired of 'the eternal repetition of the same ideas and imagery' that he felt characterized Macpherson's English *Ossian*, J.G. Lockhart, *Life of Sir Walter Scott*, (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1893), p. 128.

²¹ *Edinburgh Review*, 6 (July 1805), 429-62. (Henceforth ER in text).

prejudices not yet extinct’ in the Orcadian historian. (ER 436) Scott protested that the same individual (Rev. Andrew Gallie) claimed to have heard oral recitations in Gaelic of the Ossian poems that corresponded *verbatim* to Macpherson’s translations, when the latter was still a child. But the poem’s partisans refused point blank to countenance skepticism about the translations: as Scott put it in the letter to Seward, ‘when once the Highlanders had adopted the poems of Ossian as an article of national faith, you would far sooner have got them to disavow the Scripture than to abandon a line of the contested tales’.²² The question of ethnic prejudice lies at the roots of the antiquarian dispute that Scott would explore a decade later in *The Antiquary*, illustrating his view of the need to get beyond what we might (anachronistically) call an ‘Old Firm’ mentality in theorizing Scottish identity.²³

The often quoted conclusion to Scott’s review (‘let us therefore hear no more of Macpherson’), (ER 461) would seem to foreclose the whole issue: but given that 27 new editions of the English *Ossian* were published between 1801 and 1830, this seems to have been far from the case.²⁴ In fact, Scott’s review is more ambivalent than his summary verdict allows, in acknowledging that Macpherson was the first Scottish poet to have reached an international audience, and that he had after all drawn on some genuine Gaelic sources. Macpherson’s fault wasn’t so much in ‘embellishing’ traditional material - Scott must have been conscious that he had done something similar in ‘mending and polishing’ traditional ballads in *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. (As late as 1830, he praised Macpherson as ‘an excellent poet rather than a faithful editor and translator’, and confessed that the English *Ossian* was the model for his first original poem, ‘Glenfinlas’).²⁵ Rather, the problem lay with what Eric Gidal has marvelously described as ‘Ossianic unconformity’: that’s to say, Macpherson had mixed up the sequential stages of history, superimposing modern manners – chivalry and romance – upon Iron Age Celts, whose savagery Scott compared to that of modern-day Tahitians or Indians. To that extent, he insisted,

²² Lockhart, *Life*, p. 128.

²³ Referring to the collective title for the Rangers-Celtic football clubs dominating the Scottish sporting scene, whose supporters are often associated (respectively) with Protestant-Catholic sectarianism.

²⁴ Dafydd Moore, ‘The Reception of Ossian in England and Scotland’, in Howard Gaskill (ed.), *The Reception of Ossian in Europe*, (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004), p.30.

²⁵ ‘Essay on Imitations of the Ancient Ballad’, *Minstrelsy*, IV, 66. See Nigel Leask, ‘A Degrading Species of Alchemy’: Ballad Poetics, Oral Tradition, and the Meanings of Popular Culture’, in Philip Connell and Nigel Leask, eds., *Romanticism and Popular Culture in Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 51-71.

Macpherson's English Ossian poems bore no more resemblance to authentic Gaelic *finnigeacht* ballads than John Home's 'Tragedy of Douglas does to the Ballad of Gil Morris'. (ER 462) He hoped that the Highland Society would publish an authoritative collection of ancient Gaelic poetry in translation, together with the original text in an appendix, on the model of Charlotte Brook's *Reliques of Irish Poetry* (1789). And because Macpherson had failed to do any such thing, or to produce any material or textual evidence of his Gaelic sources, Scott found him guilty as charged.

During his 1814 cruise around the Highlands and Islands on the *Pharos*, Scott had a chance to conduct some of his own Ossianic fieldwork. Following Thomas Pennant and other authorities, he recorded Ossianic placenames in Skye,²⁶ and reported that 'a tacksman of Macleod's, called Grant, recite[d] the celebrated Address to the Sun; and another person...repeat[ed] the description of Cuchullin's car. But all agree to the gross infidelity of Macpherson as a translator and editor'.²⁷ (Both these passages occur in Macpherson's *Fingal*, and whatever the local opinions reported by Scott here concerning Macpherson's fidelity, they underlined the authenticity of his Gaelic sources. In a balanced treatment of the questions, while finding much evidence of fabrication by Macpherson, the modern Gaelic scholar Derick Thomson argues that Malcolm Laing 'goes too far with his method, as when he compares the description of Cu Chulainn's chariot to that of Solomon's, although the obvious parallel is the description...in Scottish and Irish sources'. We should note that Scott concurred, in his *Edinburgh Review* essay of 1805).²⁸ Significantly, however, when Scott visited the most celebrated of all Ossianic landmarks on the Isle of Staffa, purportedly 'discovered' by Joseph Banks in 1772, he referred only to 'the celebrated cave', rather than 'Fingal's Cave'.²⁹ Curiously, Scott regretted how little poetic tradition survived in the Hebrides, 'considering how lately the bards and genealogists

²⁶ Actually based on a spurious etymology linking the Cullins to the Ossianic hero Cuchullin.

²⁷ Walter Scott, *The Voyage of the Pharos: Walter Scott's Cruise Around Scotland in 1814*, intro. by Brian Osborne, (Edinburgh: Scottish Library Association 1998), pp. 82-3, 96.

²⁸ Derick S. Thomson, *The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson's Ossian* (Aberdeen: Oliver and Boyd, 1952), p.3. See also Donald E. Meek, 'The Gaelic Ballads of Scotland', in Howard Gaskill, ed., *Ossian Revisited* (Edinburgh University Press, 1991), pp.19-48. Scott discussed the disputed authenticity of the 'Address to the Sun' in his *Edinburgh Review* article, and in the end defended the claims of 'Mr Macdiarmid' that it was genuine against Malcolm Laing's criticism, which imputed that it was based on 'Satan's address to the Sun in Paradise Lost'. (ER 441-2)

²⁹ *The Voyage of the Pharos*, p. 96.

existed as a distinct order', but proceeded to fill the gap with the creations of his own imagination, especially in his 1815 poem *The Lord of the Isles*.³⁰

Scott's major fictional engagement with Ossian occurs at the start of Volume III of *The Antiquary*, in a comic dialogue between Oldbuck and Hector MacIntyre. After Hector's dog Juno has smashed the 'lachrymatory from Clochmaben', Hector quickly placates his uncle by offering him a beautiful Egyptian cameo ring bearing Cleopatra's head, which he had procured 'from a French savant to whom I rendered some service after the Alexandria affair'. (Given that the Battle of Alexandria, in which Hector's Regiment the Black Watch had played a particularly distinguished role, occurred on 21st March, 1801, this allusion represents a flagrant breach of chronology in a novel purportedly set in 1794.) Strolling down to Steenie Meiklebackit's funeral, Hector mentions to his uncle how the soldiers of the 42nd celebrate 'their father's fame' in order to raise their martial spirit. "I used often of an evening to get old Rory MacAlpine to sing us songs of Ossian about the battles of Fingal and Lamon Mor, and Magnus and the spirit of Muirartach". "And did you believe," asked the aroused Antiquary, "did you absolutely believe that stuff of Macpherson's to be really ancient, you simple boy?" "Believe it, sir? – how could I but believe it, when I have heard the songs sung from my infancy? "But not the same as Macpherson's English Ossian – you're not absurd enough to say that, I hope?" said the Antiquary, his brow darkening with wrath. But Hector stoutly abode the storm; like many a sturdy Celt, he imagined the honour of his country and native language connected with the authenticity of these popular poems, and would have fought knee-deep, or forfeited life and land, rather than have given up a line of them'. (p. 243)

Although retracing well-trodden territory, Scott's dialogic reworking of the arguments here is actually quite balanced in exposing the prejudices aired by both parties. When Hector insists that it is reasonable that he should admire 'the antiquities of my own country more than those of the Harolds, Harfagers, and Hacos you are so fond of', Oldbuck rebuffs him angrily in Pinkertonian vein: 'Why those, sir, - these mighty and unconquered Goths, - were your ancestors! – the bare-breeched Celts whom they subdued...were but their Mancipia and Serfs!' (p. 244) Unsurprisingly,

³⁰ Ibid., p. 83.

Hector bristles at this, insisting that ‘such names are very improperly applied to Scotch Highlanders’, and proclaiming the antiquity of his Celtic pedigree. But Oldbuck’s folkloristic curiosity – and his better nature - gets the better of Pinkertonian prejudice as he asks Hector if he can recall any of the Ossianic poems recited by the regimental piper Roderick MacAlpine.

Hector obliges, while remonstrating that his uncle ‘does not understand the Gaelic’: this forces him to translate one fragment of verse from its original, ‘a dialogue between the poet Oisín, or Ossian, and Patrick, the tutelary saint of Ireland’, which he runs over ‘well garnished with *aghes*, *aughs*, and *oughs*, and similar gutterals’. The exchange between the pagan Oisín and the Christian saint turns out to be just as bad-tempered as that which has just ensued between Oldbuck and Hector: ‘Upon my word, son of Fingal [says Patrick]/ While I am warbling the psalms, / The clamour of your old women’s tales / Disturbs my devotional exercises’. Oisín answers ‘Dare you compare your psalms, / You son of a –’ (glossed by Hector as ‘female dog’), followed by ‘Do you compare your psalms / To the tales of the bare-armed Fenians?’

Oldbuck is quick to observe to compare the racy Gaelic originals with Macpherson’s anodyne translation: and Hector is obliged to concede that ‘If you are sure of that...[Macpherson] must have taken very unwarrantable liberties with his original’. The exchange concludes with Oldbuck’s surmise that the epithet ‘bare-armed Fenians’ is a mistranslation of ‘bare-arsed Fenians’: ‘I should have thought the nudity might have been quoted as existing in a different part of the body’ (alluding to David Hume’s ‘bare-arsed banditti’). At this point, in a wonderful mock-heroic passage, Hector is sidetracked by the sight of a seal upon the beach, which arouses his sporting instincts. Snatching his uncle’s walking stick, he sallies to the attack, only to be worsted in the conflict by the aggrieved *phoca*. He picks himself up off the rocks, ‘just...in time to receive the ironic congratulations of his uncle, upon a single combat, worthy to be commemorated by Ossian himself’. (p. 246) As well as parodying Hector’s identification with Ossianic ‘mighty hunters’, this incident comically foreshadows the more serious ‘single combat’ fought between Hector and Lovel (at the instigation of the former) over Isabella Wardour, in which the Highlander again comes off worse.

As David Hewitt indicates in his notes to the Edinburgh edition, the poem recited here by Hector isn't actually contained in Macpherson's *Ossianic* corpus, but is quoted from a 'Dialogue between St Patrick and Ossian', a translation by the English ballad collector Thomas Hill of 'Oisín agus an Clerich', published in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1783, and said to be 'taken down from the recitation of a Highland blacksmith' in Glenorchy.³¹ Hill (who unlike Macpherson often published the Gaelic originals alongside his translations) was happy to acknowledge that many of the *finnsgaicht* ballads which he had collected on his field trips had an Irish source, a fact hotly denied by Macpherson, who had in fact assiduously airbrushed out any reference to St Patrick in his English Ossian.³² Although never mentioned by Scott in his 1805 review, it seems highly likely that Hill's articles in the *Gentleman's Magazine* had an important influence on his perceptions of the Ossian controversy. Hill's Ossian poems, in contrast to Macpherson's, were in a sense 'the real thing', revealing all the directness of expression (and, as we've seen, comic vulgarity) of a folk poetry passed down through oral tradition, revealingly described by Scott in his 1830 'Essay on Popular Poetry' as a 'degrading species of alchymy, by which the ore of antiquity is deteriorated and adulterated'.³³ Above all, Hill's versions of Gaelic ballads doesn't threaten the narrative of stadial history cherished by Scott, mixing up the chivalric manners of a more advanced age with the barbarism of primitive folk-heroes like Fingal and his Fianna in the manner of Macpherson's 'translations'.

In this respect, it's appropriate that Scott should put these authentic Ossianic verses into the mouth of Hector, who for all his faults (and stereotypical Gaelic impetuosity) is intended as a more acceptable embodiment of the modern Gael than

³¹ Although Hill made three tours, visiting Perthshire, and Strathspey as well as the West Highlands, he concluded that 'the songs relating to the Feinne, and their chieftain, Fion-mac-Coul...are wholly confined to Argyleshire, and the Western Highlands, where the scene of their action is supposed to have lain'. 'New Light on the Ossian Controversy', *Gentleman's Magazine*, 52 (Dec 1782), 570-1. This western geographical location, near Ireland, encouraged Hill to suggest that the poems were of Irish origin.

³² Macpherson insisted that the original poems pre-dated Christianity, and were in any case of Scottish, not Irish provenance, thereby suppressing any links with a medieval Catholic popular culture common to Ireland and Gaelic Scotland, a fact which played well with Presbyterian ministers like Hugh Blair and Andrew Gallie, who were among his staunchest supporters.

³³ *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (Edinburgh: Black, 1861), I, 22.

anything invented by Macpherson.³⁴ As a Captain in the Black Watch, Hector represents the ancient martial spirit of Fergus MacIvor, redeemed from the rebellious taint of Jacobitism, and pressed into the service of the British state. (We might recall that Edie Ochiltree, although no Highlander, is also a veteran of the ‘Forty-twa’, who had served at Prestonpans and Fontenoy.) As William Donaldson notes, the gallantry of Highland soldiers at Quebec, Ticonderoga and Seringapatam (not to mention Alexandria, and more recently, given the publication date of *The Antiquary*, Waterloo), ‘enabled even the staunchest Whig to accept them as the latter-day standard bearers of the ancient military ideals of the Scots, and they played a key role in the continuous redefinition of national stereotypes in the century following the Union’.³⁵ Scott may have known that the martial virtues of Fingal and his Fianna has been employed in the 1790’s by the Gaelic poet Duncan Ban MacIntyre (another loyalist MacIntyre) to promote anti-jacobin and anti-French propaganda, in contrast to a very different, rebellious trajectory in ‘Fenian’ Ireland, as Luke Gibbons has argued.³⁶

In conclusion, I want to return to an earlier passage of the novel where Oldbuck attempts to persuade Lovel (whom he suspects to have poetic talents) to compose an epic poem, for which he will supply the antiquarian notes: ‘I’ll supply you with a subject – The battle between the Caledonians and Romans – The Caledoniad; or, Invasion Repelled – Let that be the title – It will suit the present taste, and you may throw in a touch of the times’. ‘But the invasion of Agricola was not repelled’. ‘No, but you are a poet – free of the corporation, and as little bound down to truth of probability as Virgil himself – You may defeat the Romans in spite of Tacitus’. (p. 107) Taking a leaf out of Macpherson’s book, Oldbuck’s rewriting of history is justified by the ‘present taste’ (in 1794) for a patriotic epic that will imagine

³⁴ One of the most impressive collections of 18th century Ossianic verse in Gaelic was made by the Rev James MacLagan, who was chaplain to the Black Watch in the 1770’s and 80’s before he became minister at Blair Atholl. Much of it was gathered by MacLagan from Highland soldiers while campaigning in North America, Ireland or Europe: currently located in Glasgow University’s Special Collections, it was also ransacked by James Macpherson (and possibly annotated by him) while preparing his English *Ossian* in 1760. In this sense, Scott’s characterization of Hector MacIntyre as a regimental transmitter of an authentic Gaelic version of *Ossian* coincides exactly with the historical record, give or take a few anachronisms.

³⁵ William Donaldson, *The Jacobite Song: Political Myth and National Identity*, (Aberdeen UP, 1988), p. 70.

³⁶ See Nigel Leask, ‘Fingalian Topographies: Ossian and the Highland Tour’, *Journal for 18th Century Studies*, 39, 2 (June 2016), 183-196, 187; Luke Gibbons, ‘From Ossian to O’Carolan: The Bard as Separatist Symbol’, in Fiona Stafford and Howard Gaskill (eds.), *From Gaelic to Romantic: Ossianic Translations* (Amsterdam-Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1998), pp. 226-51.

the repulsion of foreign invasion. In so doing, Oldbuck boasts that ‘I’ll annihilate Ossian, Macpherson, and Mac-Cribb’. (p.108) Although the plot of *The Caledoniad* might sound distinctly Fingalian in representing ancient Caledonians defeating a foreign invasion, we should recall that Oldbuck was convinced that the aboriginal Scots were Goths not Celts, so his response to Macpherson is to rewrite Scottish patriotism in a Gothic idiom.

As we’ve seen, the threatened French invasion at the conclusion of *The Antiquary* turns out to be a hoax, but Lovel’s restoration as the legitimate Lord Geraldin (converted from ancestral Catholicism to the Protestant faith) permits his acceptance by Isabella Wardour, representing a *Waverley*-like marriage/union. The historical false alarm is an opportunity not only for resolving the fictional plot, but also provides an opportunity for a display of Highland martial pomp, as Glenallan’s tenants form ‘a regiment of five hundred men, completely equipped with the Highland dress, whom he had brought down from his upland glens, with their pipes playing in the van’. Forced to swallow his anti-Celtic animus, Oldbuck is pleased to note how ‘the ancient military spirit of [Glenallan’s] house seemed to animate and invigorate the decayed frame of the Earl, their leader’; and as it turns out, this military apparition of feudal loyalty is to be Lovel/Neville/Lord Geraldin’s inheritance. (p. 351) By 1816, it might have been relatively easy for Scott to write off the French invasion scares of the 1790’s in a mock-heroic vein: but there’s nothing mocking about the neo-feudal tartan pageantry evoked here, which totally eclipses Oldbuckian skepticism about ‘bare-arsed Fenians’, and offers a preview of Scott’s management of the ‘King’s Jaunt’ in 1822, when Edinburgh was literally wrapped in tartan. Moreover the exposure of Dousterswivel as a German *illuminatus* and conman does little to promote Pinkertonian or ‘Gothicist’ claims, as Oldbuck is forced to concede. Scott’s eirenic vision of Britain resolves ethnic conflict between Goths and Celts in the interest of national unity.

We saw Oldbuck speaking of ‘annihilating’ Macpherson by rewriting his Celtic epic *Fingal* as *The Caledoniad*. I’ll close with a very tentative suggestion that Scott might have pursued a similar goal in borrowing a markedly Macphersonian plot for his novel, hackneyed as that plot has seemed to critics. In the 1805 review of Malcolm Laing’s edition, he glossed the plot of Macpherson’s earlier pre-Ossian

poems, *The Hunter* and *The Highlander*: ‘An unknown youth arrives at the Scottish camp, when the Danes have made good a descent upon the coast. It will be readily anticipated that he becomes the principal hero in the ensuing battle; is discovered to be the lawful heir of the Scottish crown; marries a beautiful princess, and reigns in peace and glory’.³⁷ Fiona Stafford’s analysis of this rather stale romance plot offers a bit more nuance: ‘Macpherson examines the idea of the prince raised in obscurity, proving his worth through deeds rather than merely inheriting his power. In both, the military interest of Scotland being close to defeat but emerging victoriously is mingled with a romantic tale of love and marriage’.³⁸

Stafford also notes that the young Macpherson was here drawing on the narrative of the authentic Gaelic ‘Magnus Ballad’, which told the story of the King of Lochlin’s invasion of Ireland, providing the plot outline of *Fingal*: the ‘tale of the unknown nobleman discovering his true birth and atoning for the death of his father has much in common with the legend of Finn MacCumhail...[whose] father was traditionally slain by Goll MacMorna at the battle of Cnuch, so that the orphaned boy had to be brought up in obscurity. Eventually, the son discovers his true identity and reclaims his father’s position as head of the militia, reconciling the two warring factions of Clan Baiosgne and Clan Morna’.³⁹ Seen in this light, several episodes of *The Antiquity* might be read as mock-heroic re-workings of Macpherson’s plot, with Wardour and Lord Glenallan as the ‘failed guardians’ of Uillin, MacIntyre as the flawed hero Cuchillin, and Lovel as a mysterious Fingalian commander. Lovel reappears at a crucial point in the narrative in the guise of the conquering hero Major Neville to repel invasion, after fighting a dual with MacIntyre for the hand of the heroine. Scott doubtless intended *The Caledoniad* to ironize the relation between epic (whether neo-classical or Ossianic), and *The Antiquary*’s modern, mock-heroic narrative, where nothing of world-historical importance ends up happening, but which quite literally exposes ‘history in the making’ between facts and frauds. But if I’m correct, Scott’s novel might have owed a bit more to Macpherson’s ‘fraudulent’ *Ossian* than he was willing to acknowledge.

³⁷ ER (July 1805), p. 458

³⁸ At one point, Alpin, the hero of Macpherson’s *Highlander*, raises his clansmen to meet the threat of invasion: ‘The mountain-chiefs, in burning arms incased,/...To guard their homely huts, though mountains rose; / Yet feeling Albion in their breasts, they dare/ From rocks to rush, and meet the distant war’. Fiona Stafford, *The Sublime Savage* (Edinburgh University Press, 1988) pp. 68-7.

³⁹ Stafford, p. 69.

